

The quest for social justice in Tunisia: socioeconomic protest and political democratization post 2011

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Summary

Although the mass protests of 2010–2011 in Tunisia resulted in the introduction of a democratic system of government, the revolution's demands for work and improved living conditions have not been fulfilled. Dissatisfaction with the country's economic situation has been growing steadily since 2011, and Tunisians are pessimistic about the future. Since 2015, this frustration has been erupting in ever-larger waves of protest that convulse entire regions and in some cases, the entire country. In 2016 there were even more protests than during the year of the revolution.

This report quantitatively and qualitatively analyzes the development of socioeconomic protests in order to understand their far-reaching significance for Tunisia's political stability and find ways to avoid further escalation. Although there is no immediate risk that the government will be overthrown, the new order could well be destabilized and delegitimized. The analysis of conflict data shows three alarming trends: The number of protests has grown sharply since 2015 and contentious actions have become increasingly fragmented and depoliticized. Instead of coalitions of protesters cooperating with civil society organizations and political parties, more and more protests have been held by unconnected, unorganized actors, most of them unemployed people demanding to be admitted into the labor market (and particularly the public sector). Socioeconomic protests have also become more geographically concentrated, with most taking place in marginalized regions of the Tunisian hinterland. A tendency towards disruptive acts of protest such as blocking streets and railroads has also been observed.

To help us understand these developments, this report presents the findings of a case study in the Gafsa phosphate-mining region, which shows that the fragmentation and depoliticization result from the decades-long interplay of politics and local protests. Since the early 1970s, when the region's largest employer, the state mining company CPG was forced to trim workers and welfare services, it has become more and more difficult for local school and university graduates to enter the labor market. They wait to get formal jobs with proper social protection for many years. In sociological terms, they remain "young": dependent on their families, waiting to make the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Protesters continue to view employment in the CPG as their only solution. Their collective memory of golden times before the cutbacks clashes with a poverty that feels extremely unfair given the region's wealth of natural resources and compared with the quite highly developed coastal areas. Protests are regarded as the only way to apply pressure to preserve jobs. Since Ben Ali's overthrow, various governments have encouraged this view of protests by selectively awarding jobs to protesters – not based on their qualifications or any real need for workers, but solely to calm the situation. Under the dictatorship, comprehensive demands (such as programs to develop the region) were bloodily suppressed; today they are either ignored or palmed off with promises.

This has led to unemployed people joining in ever-smaller groups to demand jobs for themselves. Protests have become self-perpetuating, and have created a low-level mobilization that can swell into regional or even national waves of protest at the slightest cause, such as a hiring decision that is deemed unfair. Neither political nor civil society

actors have any influence on these protests – not even the organizations that worked with unorganized unemployed people before the revolution. One of them was the Union of Unemployed Graduates (*Union des diplômés chômeurs*, UDC), the only national organization for the unemployed. The UDC demands that the national education system be reformed and criticizes the lack of a political strategy for creating sustainable jobs, as well as the corrupt and opaque procedures for public-service hiring. At the local level, however, the UDC thinks about the protests the same way as the unorganized unemployed protesters, which results in holding many small actions instead of building alliances. The national leadership in turn tries to attract public attention to local protests, further weakening the representatives of the unemployed who inherently have few resources. Many unorganized unemployed people reject collaborating with the UDC because of these weaknesses. They also perceive the UDC as “political” and assume that it engages in clientelist practices. In fact, the UDC belongs to the left but rejects any clear affiliation with political parties.

The most powerful civil-society actor that could possibly mediate between the unemployed and politicians, the Tunisian General Labor Union (*Union générale tunisienne du travail*, UGTT), does not perform this task, either. In the UGTT, there is a different dynamic at play at the various organizational levels. Locally, trade unionists demonstrate their solidarity with the unemployed, commiserate with their feelings of hopelessness, and regard long disruptive protests as the protesters’ only legitimate available resource. However, at the regional and national levels, aside from generally acknowledging the basic problem of high youth unemployment, the trade unionists are critical of the unemployed peoples’ unorganized protests because blocking streets and railroad lines interferes with business production and negatively affects workers. At the same time, however, the UGTT does not propose any economic policies that could help the unemployed. The great diversity within the UGTT, whose membership swelled after the revolution, seems to add to this difficulty, as well as the way the federation has generally cooperated with the various governments in order to maintain its political influence. Both members of the UDC and unorganized actors view this as a conflict of interest for the UGTT, which they do not consider a credible mediator.

An important step to take to create social peace would be to channel the massive dissatisfaction into inclusive dialogue processes similar to those held for other issues in Tunisia. Questions about the state’s role in the economy and plans for regional development should also be discussed with jobless protesters and representatives of marginalized regions. Resources could be used to subsidize meaningful jobs such as improving the poor infrastructure instead of continuing to create jobs to calm the protests and accommodate supporters and relatives. Reforming hiring procedures would combat the pervasive corruption and clientelist networks and reduce protests against opaque recruiting methods.

Tunisia needs many reforms if it is to avoid socioeconomic dissatisfaction from seriously jeopardizing its democracy. The country’s struggling economy must no longer be used as an excuse to neglect socioeconomic demands. Social peace can be bolstered through inclusive decision-making processes – which don’t have to cost much – and transparency, as well as by complying with the rules for allotting limited resources.

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1. Introduction¹

As the only country in North Africa and the Middle East (MENA) that was able to establish a democratic system of government following mass protests in 2011, Tunisia is viewed as a beacon of hope for the whole region. Although the political transformation has floundered again and again, a new constitution entered into force in 2014, and the parliament and president were freely and fairly elected. However, these success stories hide the fact that the revolution of 2010–2011 demanded not just political but also socioeconomic change. This was clearly heard in one of the most common slogans, “*shughl, hurriya, karama wataniyya*”–work, freedom, national dignity.

Back in 2008, a six-month protest calling attention to poverty and unemployment had paralyzed the economically neglected Gafsa phosphate-mining basin. These protests are considered the precursors to the revolution of 2010–2011 that began in the economically hard-hit regions of Tunisia’s hinterland (Allal 2013). Not until the protests expanded to the coastal region and the capital Tunis, did the mass mobilization also call for democracy and political freedoms (Lesch 2014) – linking political change to expectations of socioeconomic improvements. However, since 2015, frustration has been growing, with bigger waves of protest bringing normal life to a standstill in entire regions and sometimes across the country.

This report analyzes the development of the socioeconomic protests to understand their far-reaching significance for Tunisia’s political stability. It shows that the growing protests cannot be explained by the dismal economic situation alone: The responses of government leaders encourage and even stimulate certain patterns of protest. Since the economic situation cannot be expected to improve rapidly, this report shows how social peace can be created independent of economic reforms: by including the protesters in dialogue processes about the economy and regional development, and reforming recruitment processes to increase transparency and fairness. Another overthrow of the government is not imminent, but the protests could destabilize and delegitimize the new order, especially because the protesters and in the population at large are so dissatisfied. Surveys conducted by the Arab Barometer (Arab Barometer 2011; 2013; 2015) reveal that Tunisians are increasingly concerned about the country’s economy. In 2011, 90 percent of the Tunisians questioned stated that improving the economic situation was the government’s second most important

1 This report is part of the multilateral research project, “Socioeconomic Protests and Political Transformation: Dynamics of Contentious Politics in Egypt and Tunisia against the Background of South American Experiences”, at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt. The project is conducted in cooperation with the Arab Forum for Alternatives (Cairo, Egypt) and the University of Sfax (Tunisia) and financed by the Volkswagen Stiftung. The authors thank our Tunisian project partners, Prof. Dr. Bassam Karray and Samiha Hamdi, as well as Hendrik Meyer, the office manager of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Tunis, Michael Robbins of the Arab Barometer Survey, and the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, Hager Ali, Giuseppe Campisi, Johanna Faulstich, Prisca Jöst, Ouassima Laabich, Yassine Nabli, Ronja Present and Amira Sahbi.

task, and people generally viewed the future positively. In 2015, however, only one third of those questioned were convinced that the economic situation would improve, with 60 percent of those surveyed believing that the economic situation had deteriorated since 2011. Students and young adults were the biggest critics of the situation. The close interweaving of the political order and the economic situation can be seen by the way people increasingly voiced concerns about democracy as a form of government: In 2011, only 24 percent agreed with the statement that democracy is bad for the economy, is ineffective for maintaining order and making decisions. By 2013, this view had doubled among those polled, and in 2015, it had swelled to 59 percent.

Following the mass mobilizations of 2011–2012, the general dissatisfaction expressed in the surveys has been regularly expressed in smaller protests. However, since 2015 there have been renewed waves of protest at the regional and national levels, the largest of which were violent clashes by unemployed people in January 2016 that for the first time since the revolution spread from Kasserine in the interior to the capital. The main demands were for jobs and development of the neglected periphery. Although workers, especially unionized public-sector employees, repeatedly struck for higher pay and better working conditions, this report shows a general trend towards disruptive, unorganized protests for jobs. It further shows the problematic interplay of specific demands for more jobs for individuals and the state's reaction to the demands: It sporadically yields by providing largely uneconomic jobs in order to get some peace, but does not even discuss plans to sustainably develop marginalized regions, let alone implement them. At the same time, the governments constantly invoke the poor budgetary and economic situation, which they blame on the waves of protest: They threaten public order and, along with the terrorist attacks in recent years, negatively impact on the investment climate. Politicians repeatedly call for protesters to be patient until the situation improves.

In this report we argue that instead of playing for time, we suggest ways to end the spiraling escalation that build on research on social movements. Chapter 2 provides an overview of Tunisia's socioeconomic situation and governmental economic and social policies since Ben Ali was toppled: makeshift, short-sighted reactions to pressing problems that have failed to make any noticeable improvements for the population at large. In the third chapter, we use protest and conflict data sets for a detailed analysis of the protest dynamics, the main actors, and their demands and forms of protest. A picture emerges of increasingly unorganized and disconnected protests with specific demands. The fourth chapter analyzes protests by unemployed people in a region full of contention, the Gafsa phosphate-mining basin, where the reasons for protests that go beyond demanding work become clear as well as why protesters do not network, create new structures or cooperate with organizations or political parties. This fragmentation makes it impossible for any organized player to exercise any influence on the protests and help to calm them. In Chapter 5, we examine the lack of collaboration of unemployed people with the civil society organizations with whom they cooperated during the mass demonstrations in 2008 and the anti-Ben Ali uprising in 2011: the only nationally active organization for the unemployed, the Union of Unemployed Graduates (*Union des diplômés chômeurs*, UDC) and the powerful Tunisian General Labor Union (*Union générale tunisienne du travail*, UGTT). Chapter 6 shows that this development is not a hopeless vicious circle and that incentives

can be provided so that protests will no longer be seen as the sole way to express socioeconomic dissatisfaction and pressure the government. Demands for work and dignified lives can be channeled into the system and efforts made to reach sustainable solutions. Reforms of recruiting procedures to create transparency and fairness should be continued in order to fight corruption and clientelism – thereby eliminating the most important catalyst for protest.

2. Economic and social challenges in Tunisia: Continuity in times of political change

Tunisia was long regarded as a country with great economic potential (cf. World Bank 2014: 1), with its gross domestic product (GDP) exhibiting average growth rates of 4.3 percent between 2005 and 2010. However, waves of protest in 2010-2011 showed that this kind of growth had not improved the economic well-being of the population at large. Yet the protests that toppled Ben Ali did not bring about far-reaching economic and social reforms. At first, all attention was focused on the country's political transformation, which led to numerous short-lived governments and made it difficult to institute long-term policies and reforms.

Since 2011, six different governments have been up against numerous economic problems. First, growth significantly declined: Although there was a recovery in 2012 following a recession in 2011, it has been stagnating between 1 and 2 percent since 2013 (Table 1). The service sector generates 60 percent of the GDP, 10 percent is derived from agriculture and barely 30 percent from industry.² The GDP suffered from the sharp decline in tourism, which directly or indirectly accounts for some 15 percent of all jobs (IMF 2015: 11), and annually brought in about USD 3.5 billion before the unrest began. The insecure security situation in 2011 caused the figure to decline by a quarter. In 2015, Islamist attacks in Sousse and in the National Museum of Bardo were blamed for the hotel and catering industry shrinking another 17 percent (ESCWA 2016: 91).

Table 1: An overview of the economic data³

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Per capita GDP growth	2.5	-3.1	3.0	2.0	1.8	0.0	
GDP growth	3.5	-2.4	3.7	2.3	2.3	1.0	1.3
Development aid (USD mil.)	550.4	922.1	1016.9	710.4	921.3		
Private remittances to Tunisia (USD mil.)	2063.3	2004.5	2265.7	2290.5	2346.6	1971.4	
Annual budget deficit as a share of GDP	1.0	2.6	5.5	7.0	5.0		
Unemployment	13.0	18.6	17.4	15.9	15.1	15.2	15.5
Unemployment of university graduates	23.3	33.4	31.8	32.6	31.0	30.3	31.3
Inflation rate	3.3	3.6	5.1	5.8	4.9	4.9	

The low GDP growth rate is accompanied by increasing government spending. The public debt has grown steadily since 2010, further restricting the government's financial leeway (Table 1). While in 2010, the annual loss was 1 percent of GDP, by 2013 its share had increased sevenfold, with a slight reduction in the annual deficit first observed in the following year. This difficult situation is also evident in the government's increasing debt, which rose from 40 percent of GDP in 2010 to 59 percent of GDP in 2016 (World Bank 2017). The growing budget deficit appears even more dramatic when you realize that an increasing share of the budget comes from development funds, which almost doubled

² CIA World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

³ Source: IMF 2016a; World Bank 2017; INS 2012, 2015.

between 2009 and 2012 and now represent almost one seventh of the budget. This illustrates the state's structural problem to cover its costs by itself, a very serious situation.

One aspect of the budget deficit is state revenue lost from unpaid taxes, which is partly explained by Tunisia's large share of informally employed workers. Some estimates put the informal economic sector equal to the formal sector (Aliriza et al. 2016: 9). Tax evasion is another problem for state coffers. The World Bank estimates that between 2002 and 2009 tax fraud by politically connected firms cost Tunisia approximately USD 200 million per year (World Bank 2015b). Experts believe that the situation only worsened after the revolution (Rijkers et al. 2015). While nothing improved on the revenue side, public expenses grew, mostly for public sector wages. To be sure, post-Ben Ali governments inherited a public sector that represented approximately one quarter of the country's GDP (Boughzala 2013: 14). However, after 2010, expenditures for public sector salaries again rose sharply – from 10.7 to 13 percent of GDP between 2010 and 2013 (World Bank 2015a: 10). This was less from salary increases than from large-scale hiring: Some 90,000 new positions were created in the first year after Ben Ali's fall.⁴ The Islamist Ennahda Party was accused of hiring members and sympathizers when it belonged to the troika government.⁵ After the troika, however, the number of public employees rose again – to 591,793 in 2014.⁶ Public expenses jumped from TND 6 billion in 2010 (about EUR 3 billion) to TND 13.2 billion in 2016 (EUR 5.3 billion), or 70 percent of the public budget (Muasher et al. 2016: 8). Increases were particularly sharp in the more than 90 state-owned enterprises where employment has doubled to 180,000 since 2011 (IMF 2016b: 20).

Government recruiting was a political response to one of Tunisia's most pressing problems: high unemployment. Although Tunisian governments managed to slightly lower the unemployment rate (from 18.6 percent in 2011 to 15.5 percent in 2016), among university graduates, unemployment had remained almost constant – over 30 percent – since the beginning of the upheavals (see Table 1). The continuous expansion of the educational system means that more than half of the working age population has a secondary school or university diploma or has completed a technical training program. However, the Tunisian economy does not have enough demand for such qualifications; the low-skilled jobs on offer do not meet the expectations of well-educated young adults.

4 National Institute of Statistics (INS), https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1vIRSbcJKTrPSDTyBrHcr_NKALkxSb-pms4IocPBMo34/edit#gid=842205693.

5 Those people suffered great discrimination and had no access to public resources under Ben Ali. For that reason, the jobs that Ennahda provided were viewed as a kind of compensation as part of the 2011 law granting amnesty to political prisoners and restitution for victims of the Ben Ali regime. However, the unions and Ennahda's political opponents regarded this as not just a form of clientelism but also a threat to the neutrality of the public-service sector (Bellamine 2016; Weslaty 2013).

6 National Institute of Statistics (INS), https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1vIRSbcJKTrPSDTyBrHcr_NKALkxSb-pms4IocPBMo34/edit#gid=842205693.

Companies also criticize the Tunisian educational system for not teaching the skills needed by the economy (ILO 2012). Women's unemployment is considerably higher than men's (INS 2015), although women are better educated (ILO 2012). Although their situation is improving slowly, it is still much harder for women to enter the job market than for men.

Map of Tunisian Governorates⁷



Along with economic stagnation and high unemployment, there are also huge regional disparities, particularly for young adults. In 2012, the Ministry of Regional Development and Planning published a study (ITCEQ 2012) with development indicators from the fields of education/training, technology, unemployment, income, health, justice and equality. It shows an average of 0.61 (with a maximum value of 1) for Tunisia's northeastern regions and the south and west of only 0.40 (Table 2). The Tunisian interior is a third less developed than the coast, with least-developed governorates considerably below this value (Kasserine 0.16; Kairouan 0.25; Sidi Bouzid 0.28). In the southwest, the values for education/technology and income/work, as well as for health, are 40 percent below those for the coastal areas. The disparities are slightly less for justice/equality.

⁷ Economically developed governorates are marked in gray. Source: Meddeb 2017: 3.

Table 2: Tunisia development index⁸

	Education/ Technology	Income/ Work	Health	Justice/ Equality	Development indicator
Northeast/ coast	0.70	0.72	0.34	0.69	0.61
Southwest/ interior	0.39	0.41	0.20	0.59	0.40

Although from 2010 to 2015, overall poverty dropped (from 20 percent to 15 percent), this development did not affect all of Tunisia's regions equally. In 2015, the poverty rate was below 10 percent in the north and east, and more than twice that in the rest of the country (INS 2015). In the south and west, unemployment was over 20 percent, compared with about 12 percent in the northeast (World Bank 2014: 39). When factors like gender and educational attainment are considered, the regional disparities become even more striking: The unemployment rate of well-educated women in the neglected regions is more than three times that of men. In some of the periphery, more than 50 percent of all university graduates have no jobs (ILO 2012).

Since assuming office, Prime Minister Youssef Chahed has sought to stimulate Tunisia's economy. He announced a new five-year development plan (2016–2020) that should pump USD 60 billion into economic development, with roughly 70 percent going to the least-developed interior (Muasher et al. 2016: 10). Key to the plan is boosting foreign direct investment through the adoption of a new law on investments and a big international investment conference ("Tunisia 2020") that was held in late November 2016. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are also urging that subsidies be cut. However, Chahed must carefully weigh the conflict that could be unleashed by cutting energy and food subsidies in exchange for short-term access to new financial resources (Aliriza et al. 2016).

It is clear that Tunisia's public spending is severely constrained and the government's scope of action continues to shrink, although the IMF projects that in the long term, the economy will recover. While it is true that the government has started various initiatives to tackle the country's neglected interior, it shows few signs of greater prosperity. The high rate of unemployment among well-educated Tunisians has only slightly decreased despite the addition of more public sector jobs. In fact, it appears that the creation of these jobs, most of which are said to be unproductive, largely contribute to budgetary problems.

⁸ Source: ITCEQ 2012.

3. Socioeconomic protests after 2011

The following analysis of protests in Tunisia is based on the *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project* (ACLED) database (Raleigh et al. 2010), which includes events of political violence by state and non-state actors as well as events that could encourage conflict, such as non-violent protests. The ACLED is the only database that is currently carrying out a comprehensive, quantitative, ongoing survey about protests in Tunisia – using local, regional and national media in English and French, as well as reports by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The events are manually coded.

Like all data sets that primarily rely on newspaper reporting, the ACLED is subject to certain distortions: On one hand, various external influences, such as censorship, political pressure, intimidation of journalists and global agenda-setting may influence what gets reported. Protests also have to first generate a certain amount of attention in order to be reported on. The databank thus presents a collection of protests that were in the public spotlight – not a complete view of Tunisia's protests. Furthermore, newspapers tend to report on events in which violence has played a role, and the use of only English- and French-language sources leads to the underrepresentation of smaller, more local protests in peripheral areas. These distortions should be kept in mind and are reflected on in the analysis, but actually play only a minor role in a chronological comparison like this one.

Because the ACLED only provides limited information about individual protests, further research was conducted in English-, French- and Arabic-language newspapers on ACLED-listed protests with regard to the actors, protest forms, demands, etc. A protest was coded as “socioeconomic” when the protesters' main demands were socioeconomic. According to Weipert-Fenner and Wolff (2015: 5–6), the demands concerned productive activities (access to land, subsidies, credits and taxes), basic social services (public services, health, education, water, transport and price/tariff subsidies), income (wages, pensions and work), and worker rights (such as the right to organize and employment standards). Protests that made no socioeconomic demands were classified as “other” and were not analyzed.

The last six years of Tunisian protests are marked by dramatic increase of *socioeconomically motivated protests* in 2015 and 2016 (Fig. 1). This is a new trend, both in relation to the other protests as well as in absolute numbers. Until that time, “other” protests outnumbered socioeconomic protests – except in December 2010, when the revolution started. Then in 2015 the figures were reversed, and in 2016, socioeconomic protests became much more significant. This period is also exceptional in terms of absolute numbers. The 124 socioeconomic protests held in January 2016 topped all records from 2011, the year of the revolution.

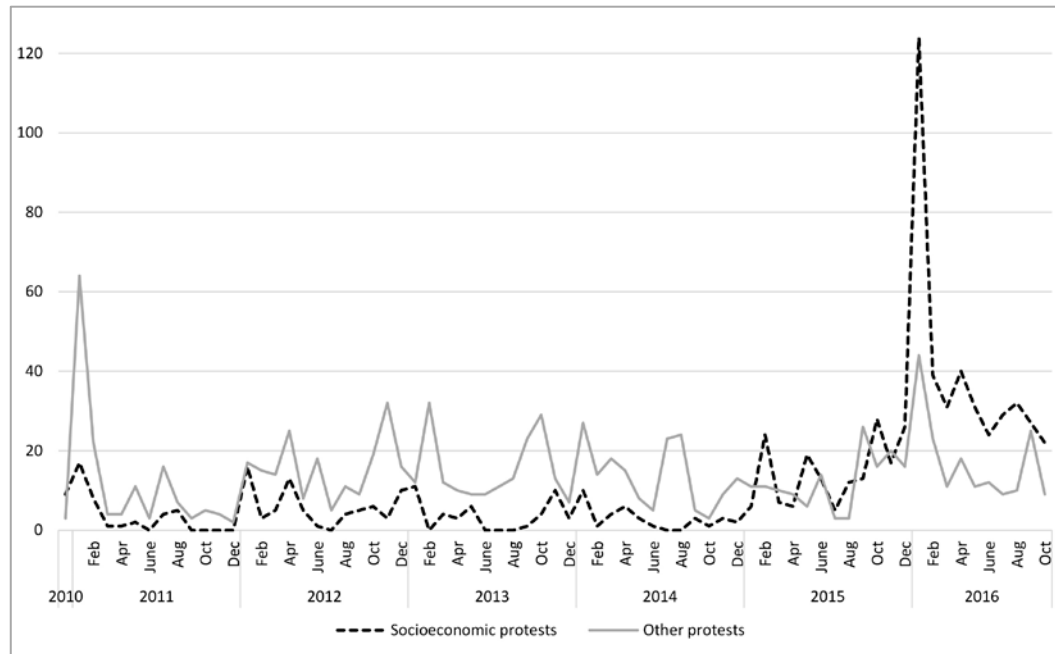
The wave of protests in December 2010, which represented the beginning of the Arab Uprisings, also included socioeconomically motivated protests in the marginalized interior that sought to draw attention to the inhabitants' terrible economic conditions. These early protests, in which about a third of the protesters were less than 24 years old (Arab Barometer 2013), were soon followed by protests in the capital demanding President Ben Ali's removal and political change. Yet even after Ben Ali was removed from office on 14 January 2011, the protests continued almost unabated. One of the main reasons was that

members of the old regime continued to hold key positions, with one of Ben Ali's old cronies, Mohamed Ghannouchi, heading the interim government. Political resistance to this caused a huge increase in protests in January 2011. Large protests accompanied the process of political transformation – especially until Ghannouchi resigned on 27 February. While socioeconomic protests are a recurring phenomenon in Tunisia, the transformation of the political system stimulated much more frequent mobilization.

This scene hardly changed in the following years. Until its adoption in 2014, the new constitution was heavily contested, particularly the role of Islam in Tunisia (cf. Boubekeur 2016). The debate was not just carried out in the constituent assembly but also inspired many protests between 2012 and 2014. The deteriorating security situation also brought people into the streets, while socioeconomic protests were generally less significant during this period.

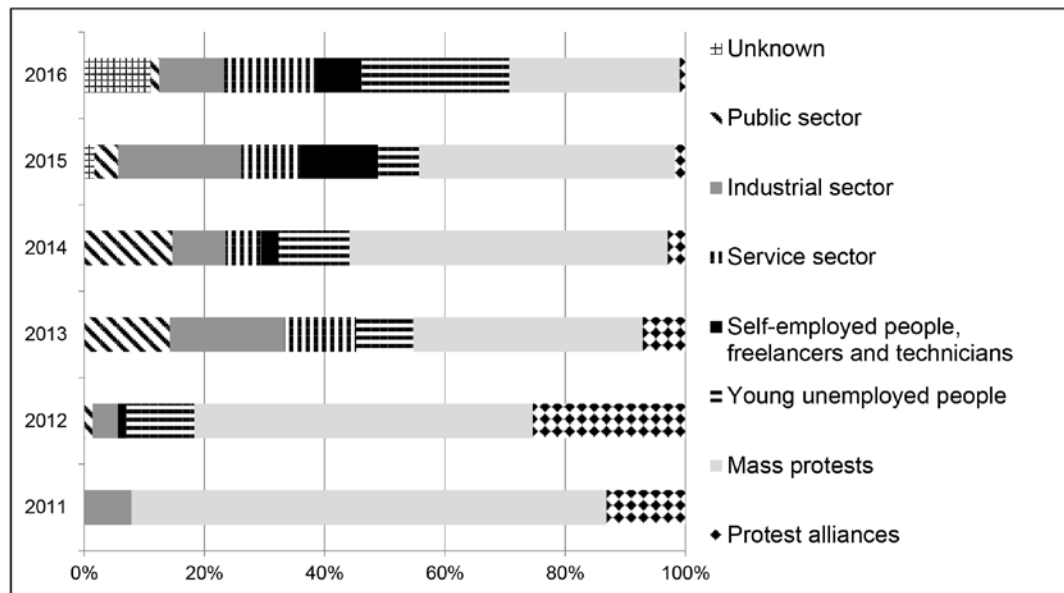
In 2015, the situation changed radically and socioeconomic issues became the focus of the protests: In the spring, collective bargaining in the public sector provided grounds to demonstrate about socioeconomic issues. The industrial policies of the neglected hinterland were criticized and the distribution of revenue from the oil sector was debated. Unorganized protests by unemployed people and informal workers demanding that their activities be regularized and legalized caused a big surge in the numbers of protests. The Libyan border closing and new customs regulations provided other grounds to protest (cf. Meddeb 2017). The rise in socioeconomic protests was accompanied by a decline in other protests. While between 2011 and 2014, an average of 169 “other” protests were held each year, in 2015 the figure dropped to 143. With regard to socioeconomic protests, the 176 protests counted in 2015 greatly outnumbered the previous annual average (2011 to 2014) of 47. Although socioeconomic protests had already topped the previous record of “other” protests, in three months of 2015 they surpassed even the January 2011 record high of socioeconomic protests.

The year 2016 began with a wave of protests that somewhat resembled those of December 2010. In the marginalized interior, protests about the worsening socioeconomic condition and the plague of unemployment quickly developed into a large wave of protests that also inspired solidarity protests in the capital. Although the wave of protests came to a rather abrupt end after two weeks, they had an effect well into the year and mobilized additional actors. The year 2016 was marked by a new increase in the number of socioeconomic protests. While the number of “other” protests was just over their annual average, the number of socioeconomic protests grew dramatically.

Figure 1: Protests in Tunisia⁹

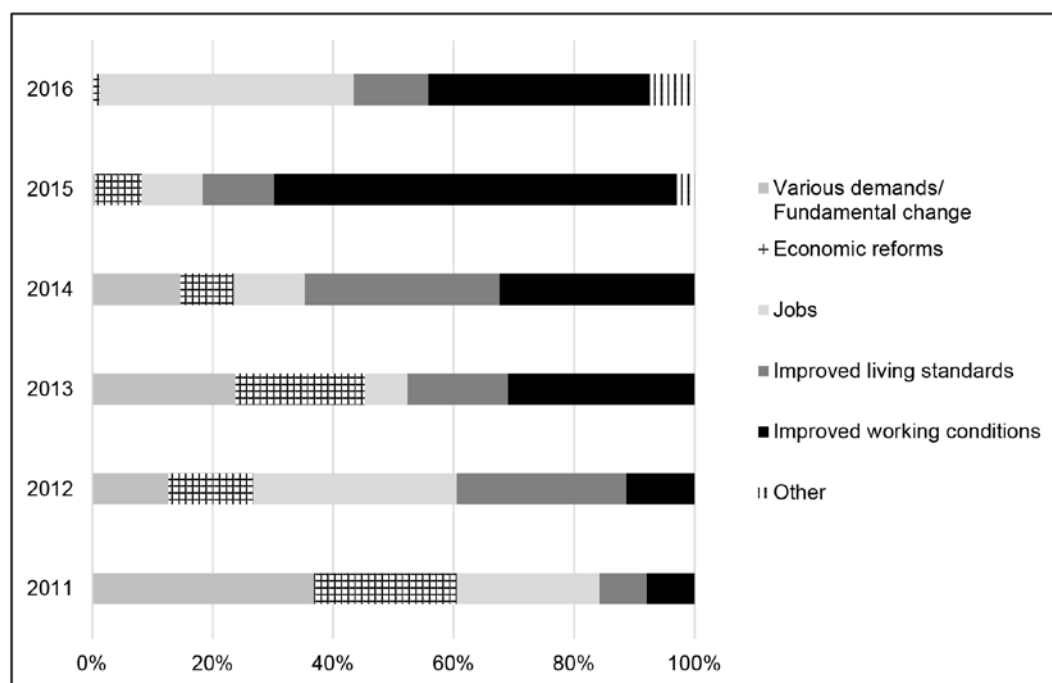
The type of actors in socioeconomic protests had greatly changed since the unrest began in late 2010 (Fig. 2). In 2011 and 2012, industrial sector workers accounted for a scant 10 percent of all protesters. In 2012, young unemployed people made up a similar share. This period was marked almost exclusively by mass protests by various types of actors. Beginning in early 2013 and continuing into 2014, the scene changed decisively: During that time, mass demonstrations accounted for barely half of all socioeconomic protests while employees from the service and public-service sectors began to protest. In 2015 and 2016, there were more and more sector-specific protests, so that in 2016, large heterogeneous groups organized barely 30 percent of the socioeconomic protests. Then, in 2016 a large increase in young unemployed protesters was observed who, at 25 percent, accounted for the largest group.

9 Source: Authors' data collection based on the ACLED.

Figure 2: Socioeconomic protesters¹⁰

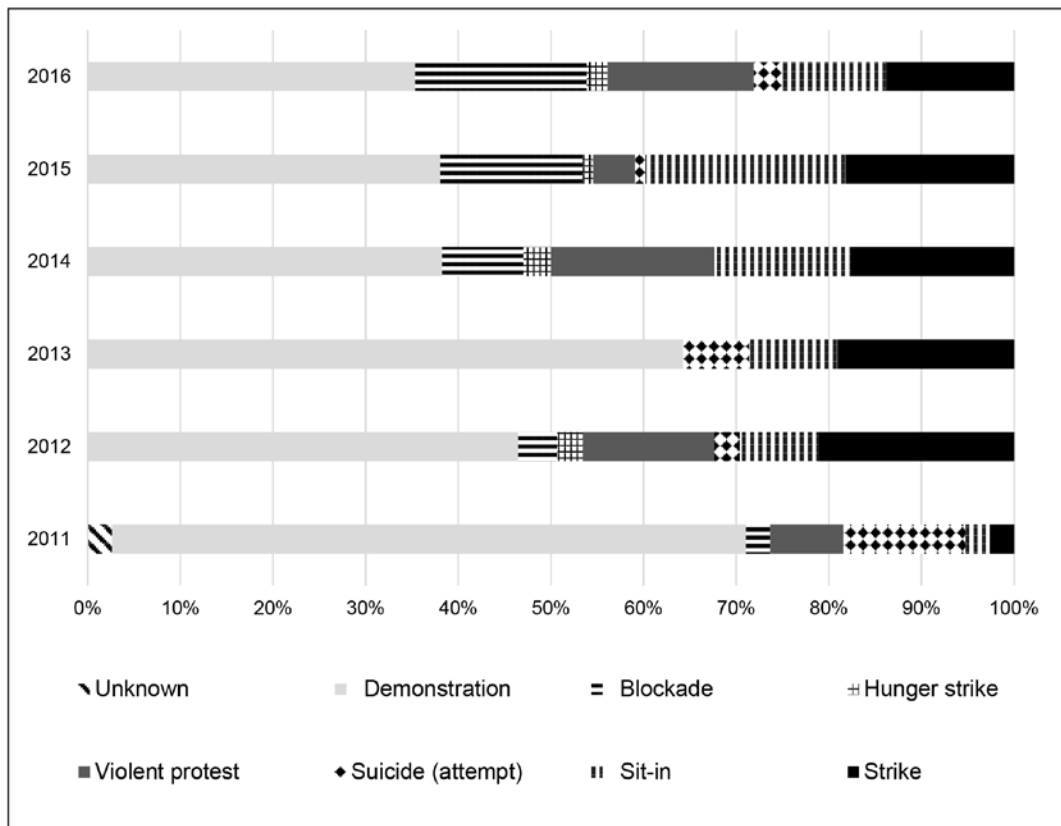
Both the types of protesters and their demands became increasingly differentiated (Fig. 3). Protests demanding fundamental change were gradually replaced by protests with specific demands, with demands for jobs and better working conditions beginning to dominate protests in 2015. The “jobs” category includes both demands for job creation and individual demands for employment. Demands for fundamental change and various demands dominated 38 percent of all protests, but continually dropped in significance until 2016 when they were not even mentioned. Demands for better working conditions, which represented barely 10 percent of protesters’ concerns in 2011 continued to grow in significance until they peaked in 2015, when over 60 percent of socioeconomic protests raised these demands. This category covers issues like higher pay, as well as legalizing work in the informal sector and lifting labor restrictions. In 2011 and 2012, demands for job creation and positions for individuals dominated protests, then became less important in 2013. In 2016, jobs again topped the protesters’ demands. Demands for economic reforms, mostly in protests in Tunisia’s neglected interior, played a decisive role until 2013. Although politicians generally still ignore the marginalization, since 2014, protesters in the neglected regions have been making more specific demands, among them job creation.

¹⁰ Source: Authors’ data collection based on the ACLED.

Figure 3: Protesters' demands¹¹

Over the past six years, the type of protest has also changed, with an observable increase in disruptive protests (Fig. 4). Until 2013, the most common form of protest was the demonstration. Since 2014, however, there have been more and more blockades, sit-ins and violent protests. There appears to be a change from using peaceful protest forms to adopting unconventional and confrontational tactics. Approximately one quarter of the strikes, which in Tunisia are a constant phenomenon, are held in the industrial sector, with somewhat less than 20 percent in the service sector and in the public sector.

11 Source: Authors' data collection based on the ACLED.

Figure 4: The types of protest¹²

In the marginalized regions where some 4.8 million people live, socioeconomic protests are held more regularly than in the coastal areas (6.18 million inhabitants). There were between 5 and 73 protests annually per million inhabitants (Table 3) in Tunisia's neglected interior, as opposed to between 2 and 26 protests in the coastal areas. The ratio of protests in the hinterland to those on the coast peaked in 2012: For each protest per million coastal inhabitants, there were 2.92 in the interior. Although this ratio dropped in 2013, starting in 2014 there were twice as many protests in the marginalized interior regions.

¹² Source: Authors' data collection based on the ACLED.

Table 3: Socioeconomic protests by region¹³

	Protests in marginalized regions	Protests per million inhabitants	Protests in coastal areas	Protests per million inhabitants	Ratio
2011	22	4.58	15	2.43	1.88
2012	43	8.96	19	3.07	2.92
2013	19	3.96	22	3.56	1.11
2014	20	4.17	12	1.94	2.15
2015	116	24.17	64	10.36	2.33
2016	349	72.71	160	25.89	2.81

The protests in Tunisia never stop changing: Between 2011 and 2014, socioeconomic protests were a constant phenomenon but were less significant than other types of protests, with an average of 47 socioeconomic protests held each year and more than three times as many “other” protests (169). Socioeconomic and other types of protests were also held at the same time, with months of numerous protests alternating with calmer months. In 2015, the picture changed: Socioeconomic protests became a constant feature of everyday life in Tunisia; there were hardly any periods without some protests about socioeconomic concerns. Socioeconomic protests no longer appeared to be held just in months with lots of protests; they were held without regard to other protests; and 2015 was the first year in which there were more socioeconomic than other types of protests (176 versus 145). Compared with an average of 47 socioeconomic protests from previous years, the nearly four-fold increase is striking. In 2016, there was another sharp increase: 399 socioeconomic protests compared with 172 “other” protests.

13 Source: Authors’ data collection based on the ACLED.

4. Unemployed protests in the hinterland: Growing mobilization and fragmentation

Unemployed protests have long played a prominent role in socioeconomic protests in Tunisia.¹⁴ The six-month-long uprising triggered by corrupt hiring practices in the Gafsa region in 2008 is regarded as one of the precursors to the revolution of 2010–2011 (Allal 2013; Chomiak 2011). Employment was one of the key issues in the mass mobilization that led to Ben Ali's overthrow. Since the rate of unemployment has remained high, it is no surprise that since 2011 unemployed people have regularly protested, given the greater freedoms of assembly and speech. When considered from the perspective of democratization, an increase in protests after the fall of a dictator is generally a good sign. What is alarming, however, is the sharp growth in protests starting in 2015, when political institutions were again functioning and it should have been possible to direct problems to the political system. Instead, there was a shift from protesting with civil society and political organizations to protesting in ever-smaller units. Furthermore, Tunisia appears to be a very divided country in which the protests of unemployed people mainly take place in its socioeconomically marginalized hinterland.

These results of our quantitative analysis will be clarified through a qualitative study of jobless protests that can help suggest possible solutions. We selected one of the marginalized interior regions with one of the highest number of protests, the phosphate-mining region of the Gafsa Governorate.¹⁵ Despite a history that was full of contention before the revolution, in 2015 the region experienced entirely new waves of protest. In spring 2015, for example, protests brought phosphate mining to a standstill – something that hadn't even happened during the revolution of 2010–2011.¹⁶ On 16 January 2016, a new wave of demonstrations and sit-ins began in the city of Kasserine and only three days later new protests were held in Gafsa that included unemployed people who used the anniversary of the revolution on 14 January to draw attention to their unchanged predicament.¹⁷ This example shows how especially smaller, low-intensity protests can spread rapidly without any particular

14 Our findings about unorganized protests by jobless people, the UDC and the UGTT are based on over 30 interviews and focus groups with activists, NGOs, politicians and journalists in three visits to Tunisia (November 2014, March 2015, and October and November 2016), as well as participant observation at the World Social Forum held in Tunis in March 2015. Samiha Hamdi of the University of Sfax helped us to analyze the jobless movement in Gafsa.

15 Between March 2014 and November 2016, the Tunisian NGO, the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) counted around 1,300 protests in Gafsa (see their monthly reports at: www.ftdes.net).

16 Total productivity dropped dramatically: In 2010, 8 million tons of phosphate were mined, but only 11 million tons between 2011 and 2015. Although the slump is blamed on the protests, rumors have it that the phosphate mines in Gafsa are nearing depletion; interview with a Tunisian political scientist, Sfax, November 2016.

17 Interview with a jobless activist in Redeyef, November 2016

organization. To better understand these dynamics, we investigate what sparks protests, their mobilization networks and interactions with the political class.

First, a general comment about the protesters: When the Tunisian press reports about jobless mobilization, it usually associates it with “youth” – young unemployed people or young protesters, who characterize the movement. Although some protestors are in their forties, from the sociological perspective on intergenerational relationships, they belong to the category of adolescents. The young men and women¹⁸ who mobilize for employment have not yet entered the labor market, or more precisely, the formal labor market, since many of them do work in the informal sector. Some protesters consider themselves unemployed even if they are formally but precariously employed since most salaries are so low that they don’t suffice for an independent life. Most protestors want a government job in a public-sector firm or in public service because government jobs provide not just job security but also broad access to systems of social protection like health insurance and pension schemes. Such securities are often prerequisites to getting married, leaving home and founding a family. People without jobs are forced to remain “young” – dependent on their parents. Being stuck in the supposedly transitional phase termed *waitthood* – waiting to be included and to become adult (Singerman 2007) – is the primary grievance of young jobless protesters.

4.1 The social meaning of unemployment in the case of Gafsa

Phosphate is a natural resource whose importance can hardly be overestimated: It is the essential supplier of energy in fertilizers that started the green revolution in the late nineteenth century and which we need to feed today’s world. Experts estimate that at current consumption levels, known phosphate deposits will be depleted in 30, or at most 100, years.¹⁹ However, the huge importance of this resource is hardly noticeable in the mining region of Gafsa with its lousy infrastructure, healthcare services and educational opportunities. Until well into the 1970s, the situation was quite different. In the era of French colonialism (1881–1956), European companies mined the rich phosphate areas. After independence, they were merged to create the *Gafsa Phosphate Company* (CPG), which became a central pillar of the local economy. Not only did the new state company create jobs, but it also provided basic amenities, such as water and electricity, and education and healthcare facilities, as well as supermarkets and sports clubs. The four so-called mining towns – Redeyef, Oum Larayes, Metlaoui and Mdhila – that grew up around the CPG, were

18 Virtually no women take part in unorganized protests, and although women belong to the UDC, they are a distinct minority. This is hardly surprising given the prevailing image of the male as the main breadwinner (Mansuy/Werquin 2015: 3). In addition, especially for women in the periphery, public protests are not viewed as an appropriate way to get involved – partly because of the risk of escalation.

19 A Sustainable Global Society. How Can Materials Chemistry Help? White paper from the Chemical Sciences and Society Summit (CS3) 2010, March 2011, pp. 16;
<https://www.makro.ch.tum.de/fileadmin/w00bm/v/www/Mediathek/whitepaper-engl.pdf>.

privileged places. It became normal for at least one child of each miner who retired to take the open position in the CPG (Allal 2010; Hibou 2015).

In the early 1980s, the deteriorating economy and rising government debt pushed Tunisian politicians to “modernize”: They switched from the state development model to the market economy. The unprofitable CPG was forced to make cost-cutting reforms. The expensive, labor-intensive underground mining was replaced by cheaper, albeit environmentally harmful, open-pit mining. Little by little, quasi-state functions that the CPG had fulfilled were outsourced. Early retirement programs and the practice of not filling job vacancies prevented the need to fire workers, creating no resistance but only gradually reducing the workforce. The number of CPG employees dropped from 16,000 in the mid-1980s to between 6,000 and 8,000 in the mid-1990s and around 6,000 in the 2000s (Hibou 2015: 305). State attempts to promote structural change failed partly because of inadequate financial resources but mostly because of the lack of any new model to develop the region.²⁰ A system of subcontractors who assumed functions previously assured by the CPG gave local leaders like the governor and the mining unions exclusive hiring rights, and the lack of transparency fostered the creation of clientelist networks. At the same time, state investments were flowing into new firms in the northeastern coastal areas. Starting in the mid-1990s, Tunisia’s sharp population growth increased pressure on the labor market, causing more stress. The first small protests sprang up when new positions were announced for whom only a few applicants were considered (Hibou 2015). In 2008, it became obvious that this development was seriously endangering social peace and when the CPG published a list of new hires in January, new protests were held. However, this time they were not just local expressions of disapproval. Demonstrations, sit-ins and street blockades spread through the mining towns. The regional head of the trade union federation UGTT Amara Abassi was accused of manipulating the hiring process to benefit his patronage network. Soon the protests also began to demand jobs and regional development. It took the brutal deployment of the security forces and the army to stop the unrest in June 2008 (Gobe 2010).

While Ben Ali’s regime sent massive police force and soldiers to suppress the revolt, the seriousness of the situation also persuaded the government to increase its subsidy from a few million TND to TND 400 million per year. New companies were founded and 2,800 jobs created in the field of environmental protection alone – but companies paid wages without creating real jobs and the new positions paid much worse than CPG jobs. Furthermore, Tunisian entrepreneurs who were close to the regime controlled most of the new firms. They could do whatever they wanted in their own companies as long as they hired people from the region. Wherever real jobs were created, especially in textile companies, the working conditions were very precarious (Hibou 2015: 318–319). In a nutshell: More financial resources were made available but there was no real structural change. At the same time, no regional or local developments were initiated. Decentralization was regarded as a threat to the central authorities.

20 For an overview of the various approaches, see Hibou (2015: 315–316).

Developments prior to the 2011 revolution are significant today because the historical context provides a basis for comparison and helps us to understand the motivation for the mobilizations. Young people had vivid memories of the mining region's golden age – not from personal experience, but from the collective memory. In interviews, all the unemployed activists vividly described what the region once offered.²¹ Another reason to mobilize was the region's decline in comparison with the coastal regions, which had prospered in recent decades. Finally, the activists bemoaned their poverty in light of the region's wealth of resources. They expressed pain and anger about these injustices, along with the conviction that they were entitled to CPG's discontinued social services.

This background information explains why protests were often sparked when new positions posted at the CPG seemed to suggest that employment was finally within reach and with it, access to the "lost paradise".²² Yet hopes were then dashed because most applicants were never given a chance. Conversations with activists revealed that the longer they had been waiting to get a job, the more they felt like protesting. Some interviewees even claimed that having to wait a long time made them more entitled to get jobs. Identity also played a role: People from outside the region were not viewed as deserving local employment. The family's rootedness in the town and the region were viewed as providing one with a claim to employment. However, activists also stated that corruption and clientelist networks negated their right to work. One type of preferential treatment came from direct payments to the people who select workers. The second type of favoritism was linked to social connections, with jobs only given to members of clans and families. Because poor unemployed people can't offer bribes, only wealthy people get hired, while clientelist networks reproduce social hierarchies because only those with good connections can find jobs.²³

4.2 How protest forms and mobilizing networks interplay with politics

Sit-ins are the most common form of protest by unorganized unemployed people. Usually they begin with demonstrations and disruptive forms of protest, such as blocking streets and railroad tracks. Although these may spread to other towns and sometimes even throughout the entire mining region, they do not lead to building coalitions or organizational structures. That means that most waves of protest do not create new mobilizing networks²⁴ and eventually peter out. Small protests do, however, often turn into

21 This paragraph is based on interviews with unemployed activists in Oum Larayes and Redeyef in November 2016, as well as interviews in 2015 that are quoted in Hamdi/Weipert-Fenner (2017).

22 Interview in Redeyef, 17 August 2015, quoted in Hamdi/Weipert-Fenner 2017.

23 In interviews conducted in November 2016, multi-million dinar sums were named for a job with the CPG – incredible amounts, especially since it's unlikely that a well-to-do person would be interested in working for a mining company. However, it illustrates how social exclusion is interpreted.

24 This is also confirmed by the analysis of the jobless protests in January 2016 by Prisca Jöst (2017).

sit-ins that can last for months, although consolidated protests lose their disruptive character when just a tent is erected in the vicinity of the mining company, or a railroad track that is no longer used is blocked. Without banners and graffiti adorning the tent, the protest is easily overlooked.

We must remain aware that although protests may remain on a low-intensity level for a while the slightest trigger will attract more people. Without needing organization or direct communication, the protest tactics will change, and quickly and spontaneously turn into larger protests. Calls to protest are not only spread online through social media, but also offline, through acquaintances and relatives.²⁵ In the Gafsa mining basin, however, most unemployed protests remain fragmentary. The main units of protesters are small groups whose solidarity is often due to being blood relations or neighbors; they have no formal leadership or representative body. Families may be particularly important because the closest social networks suffer an unemployed member's lack of integration and eventually their own resilience reaches its limits. Some activists derive their claim to work for the CPG from their families' local or regional roots. Keeping the number of protesters small is also related to the attempt to squeeze jobs out of the CPG: The bigger the group, the less likely it is that a protest will reap a job for an individual protester.

This way of thinking about protests can also be seen as resulting from political action. The 2008 protests did lead to more hiring by Ben Ali's regime – just to calm the protests. The government incentives system responded to the threat of public protests by issuing concessions through the CPG to individual unemployed people in an effort to create short-term stability. That spared the government the costs of a real development plan but at the same time, it also destroyed people's interest in working with larger groups or organizations. Since "social" protests with specific personal demands, rather than broader political demands, were rewarded, collaborating with political actors and NGOs became less appealing.

The declining appeal of cooperating with civil society organizations and political parties since Ben Ali was toppled seems to be a counterintuitive development. In 2008, unorganized unemployed protests that were mobilized along family lines worked with the Tunisian Communist Workers Party and the *Harakat al-tajdid* Party (the "Renewal Movement"), as well as with the Union of Unemployed Graduates (UDC) and NGOs like the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (*Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates*, ATFD) and the Tunisian Human Rights League (*Ligue tunisienne des droits de l'homme*, LTDH). Today's isolated protests do not cooperate. Back in 2008, protesters cooperated with local unions, especially the teachers' union, whose secretary general Adnan Hajji became the unofficial leader of the six-month uprising.

25 Group interviews with unemployed activists in Redeyef and Oum Larayes in November 2016.

Today Hajji is an independent member of the Tunisian parliament. He agrees that the situation remains bad.²⁶ Because his attempts to use his new position to mediate have often failed, he has come to reject disruptive protest forms.²⁷ Other politicians also have no influence on the unemployed activists who vehemently distrust members of political parties on the assumption that they engage in clientele politics or exploit unemployed people to compensate for their own weaknesses and increase their own power.²⁸ This also applies to the political parties that unemployed activists collaborated with in 2008.²⁹ Protesters are disappointed by local and regional government representatives who are physically absent and perceived as inactive – as shown in the poor infrastructure and miserable healthcare services that push seriously ill people to drive many hours to seek treatment in Sfax or Tunis. Emblematic of the absent national government is the “delegate” or civil servant who is supposed to mediate between the governor and the subregion but who – in the case of the mining basin – doesn’t even live in the area. There is no communication about local problems and national politics – with members of parliament, political parties, or administrative bodies.

This explains why separate groups of unemployed protesters appeal directly to the national government. When small groups manage to talk with prime ministers or relevant ministries, they consider their meetings successes and want to pursue these strategies. Such talks, however, are only about finding jobs for individual protesters, not about demanding regional development programs or decentralization. Politicians hardly do anything besides holding ad hoc and arbitrary discussions with separate groups. The two most important parties in the current coalition government, the secular Nidaa Tunis party and the Islamist Ennahda Party, have announced regional development programs but taken no steps to implement them, much less present any ideas about sustainable development. Various prime ministers and President Essebsi have repeatedly called for protesters to be patient because their problems cannot be solved overnight. Again and again, Essebsi invokes the risks that protests pose for domestic security, either by threatening public order or by presenting (Islamist) terrorists with the opportunity of blending into crowds of protesters (Marzouki 2015). The last reproach lacks any real basis – thus far – particularly since Islamists in general (even the moderate Ennahda Party) have not played any role in the protests.

Analyzing one of Tunisia’s most important centers of protest shows that, at the local level, feelings of rage and disappointment about a situation that is felt to be unjust are reinforced by the collective memory of the golden days of jobs that came with social

26 Interview with Adnan Hajji in Tunis in November 2014.

27 <http://www.realites.com.tn/2016/01/adnane-hajji-latteinte-aux-biens-publics-et-privs-constitue-une-ligne-rouge/>.

28 Interviews with activists in Redeyef and Oum Larayes in November 2016.

29 These include the Popular Front, the relatively successful alliance of leftwing parties that merged with the Communist Workers’ Party, which is led by the CWP spokesperson, Hama Hammami.

protection. When hiring announcements appear to offer access to public sector positions but are in fact blocked by patronage and corruption as well as the obvious dearth of jobs, these tensions erupt. Following the big protests, very small sit-ins and blockades have become the established modes of protest. While these do not seem to be disruptive, they create a kind of basic mobilization that can swell into bigger waves of protest at any moment. Mediation by political parties, members of parliament, and local or regional administrations clearly either fail or are rejected by suspicious jobless people. Various governments have reacted by allocating scattered jobs to small groups of protesters, which only encourages greater fragmentation. Since the number of protests is increasing and easily stimulate protests across the region or throughout the entire country, this short-term strategy does not seem to be worth pursuing. Given political actors' inability to respond to the protesters' difficulties and deal with them in the political process, in the next section we examine the two most important civil society actors who have already played significant roles for unemployed people in Gafsa and could serve as mediators.

5. Civil society actors: Who can calm the protests?

All post-revolution governments have continued to play Ben Ali's game: When confronted with a mass mobilization, the prime minister or other relevant minister has made promises to individual groups of protesters that have only been partly fulfilled (Hibou 2015: 340). Their responses, however, make it seem pointless for the protesters to form organizational structures, which leads to the unemployed movement becoming fragmented. While the government has not yet been pushed to meet broader demands, this fragmentation has created a vehement dynamic that no organized actor can control. This section explores why the two civil society organizations that are best positioned to mediate have no influence: These are the only nationally active organizations for the unemployed, the Union of Unemployed Graduates (UDC) and the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT). Local representatives of both organizations actively cooperated with the protesters in Gafsa during the revolt of 2008. Why did the collaboration end, and which new problems arose after their common enemy, the autocratic regime, was removed?

5.1 Too weak, too "politicized": The Union of Unemployed Graduates

The Union of Unemployed Graduates (UDC) should have had the organizational and human resources potential to represent the marginalized "youth". Unorganized unemployed people with and without university degrees mobilize much like UDC members. Although the UDC addresses the problems specifically faced by university graduates rather than those of all unemployed people, it does not advocate anything unique for its members. Why the UDC is not able to mediate for unorganized unemployed protesters despite sharing their concerns is explained below.

The UDC was founded in 2006 by former activists of the General Union of Students of Tunisia (*Union générale des étudiants de Tunisie*, UGET) who held a sit-in in front of the

Ministry of the Interior to protest the lack of jobs for university graduates. When the government completely ignored them, they founded the UDC, which began with a few hundred activists and three offices. In addition to the Tunis headquarters, there was an office in Jendouba, the capital of the eponymous governorate, and a third in Redeyef in Gafsa Governorate. From the beginning, the UDC was concerned with the country's marginalized regions and got involved in the revolt in the Gafsa mining basin in 2008. With the trade union federation UGTT, the UDC offered organizational support to the revolt, but did not assume any leadership. Nevertheless, the Gafsa rebels chanted the UDC slogan, "*shughl, hurriya, karama wataniyya*" – work, liberty, national dignity – which was also heard during the revolution of 2010-2011.

Only after Ben Ali was toppled could the UDC be officially registered and operate legally. Before that, like most civil society actors who criticized the regime, the UDC needed the UGTT's support. The UDC was also connected to the UGTT at a deeper level: Like the student union, the UDC was clearly leftwing: Joining the trade union federation was regarded as the logical continuation of activism within a political camp, with the UDC serving as a bridge from student to worker activism.³⁰ However, unorganized unemployed people used the UDC's leftwing positioning to justify their refusal to join or cooperate with it: They avoided any "politicized engagement" which they stigmatized as political patronage.

After 2011, UDC membership grew to 16,000, of whom 2,000 to 3,000 were active.³¹ It has a regional office in each governorate, as well as some 70 local offices nationwide. The executive office and representatives of regional units try to coordinate their positions and operations in a joint committee while the local and regional levels mostly act very independently. In 2013, the UDC elected its executive board – the "executive office" – and their longtime informal president, Salam al-Ayari, to be the UDC general secretary.³² With more members in more parts of the country, UDC activities also increased. Since the revolution, the union has largely used Facebook to inform members about its activities. We systematically collected all UDC Facebook news and statements about protests between September 2011 (when the UDC first began to use Facebook on a large scale) and June 2015, and categorized them according to demand and form of protest. More than a third of all UDC activities since 2011 took place in the first six months of 2015. Most of its demands were about employment and development or recruiting procedures in public service. Starting in late 2013, protests about how the state dealt with protests – repressing or ignoring them – grew in importance.

The right to work demanded by activists is generally interpreted as the right to be employed in public service. Most researchers regard this claim as a remnant of the social

30 This is the view of both members of these organizations and political opponents (interview with the head of the Ennahda Party's student association, Tunis, March 2015).

31 Interview with the UDC general secretary, Salam al-Ayari, Tunis, March 2015.

32 The UDC's next congress for electing its leaders is scheduled for 2017.

contract with the authoritarian regime (Hertog 2016) or as an “authoritarian bargain” (Desai et al. 2009), according to which, in the case of university graduates, political loyalty is swapped for a government position and the accompanying socioeconomic privileges. Whether unemployed graduate activists are ready to trade their newly won political freedoms for socioeconomic security is highly questionable. What is certain is that they want a more economically active state that creates jobs. They have the same demands as the unorganized unemployed activists, who generally seek jobs in the public sector or in civil service, depending on their qualifications.

Another UDC demand regards recruiting procedures that generally fires up both UDC members and unorganized protesters. The UDC’s protest, however, particularly concerns academics – the competitive centralized exams, or *concours*, which are supposed to determine who is best qualified for the jobs. The *concours* system is regarded as being extremely corrupt. Moreover, political cronyism favors members of the parties in power, a prime example of which was the alleged hiring of 18,000 Ennahda supporters by the new Ennahda-led troika government. Activists also consider that too few jobs are allocated through the *concours*: Even if the process were clean, they’d still have minimal chances of success.³³

A closer look reveals local and national differences within the UDC. Many protest activities that are organized by its local offices, particularly the more drastic forms of protests like hunger strikes, resemble those of unorganized unemployed activists in which protesters demand jobs for themselves.³⁴ The national UDC criticizes government strategies of allotting jobs merely to calm a situation as well as creating new measures like training programs and internships for academics that mask the fact that the young people are still waiting to be regularly employed.³⁵ At the same time, the UDC’s national board is committed to providing support for local and regional protests.³⁶ Politicians and public authorities particularly ignore autonomous local actions, for which the national UDC attempts to generate media attention through expressions and acts of solidarity. Activists, however, consider that the UDC’s efforts have significantly tapered off. This clarifies why the UDC is increasingly protesting the way the state ignores the unemployed – another way that the UDC resembles the unorganized protesters, who are rebelling against having to wait for improvements.

The subject of education plays a special role in the UDC because of its focus on unemployed university graduates. In interviews, members of the executive office stress that Tunisia’s inferior education doesn’t prepare university graduates for the job market. It is

33 Interviews and focus groups with UDC activists in Tunis in March 2015.

34 Analysis of the protests using Facebook posts and interviews with participants in UDC-organized hunger strikes in Tunis in March 2015.

35 Interview with Salam al-Ayari, Tunis, March 2015. See also Hafaïedh (2000). For an overview of these programs, see Angel-Urdinola et al. (2015: 71–73).

36 Interviews with members of the UDC executive office in March 2015.

striking, however, that this subject is not an issue in the UDC's actual activities – perhaps because it could prevent broad sections of the population from understanding or supporting UDC activities. In any case, unions, particularly those in the UGTT's education sector, are very keen on protesting, which makes them natural cooperation partners for the UDC – as is the UGET, the students union, which begot the UDC. This indicates general problems within the mobilizing structures: Under Ben Ali, there was greater solidarity among the organizations and now that their common enemy is no longer there, both unorganized and organized unemployed people act more autonomously. The UDC continues to benefit from the support of the trade union federation: Hunger strikes are often held in UGTT offices and normally receive expressions of solidarity from the labor union. However, the UDC has a certain mistrust of trade unionists and fears that its mobilization will be used to pressure politicians. UDC activists claim that as soon as the UGTT sits down at the negotiating table to deal with the government, it demands pay increases for state employees so that there will be no funds left in the tight budget to create jobs. This conflict of interests reinforces the UDC's feeling of being powerless in face of the too-powerful UGTT.³⁷ In fact, the UDC has a certain distance from the UGTT that does *not* correspond to the rigid political stereotypes that unorganized unemployed people impute to the UDC and use as an excuse to not cooperate with it.

UDC members mistrust political actors much as unorganized unemployed activists do. This may not be surprising with regard to the strongest parties, Nidaa Tunis and Ennahda, which are located in the economic-liberal spectrum. With particular regard to Ennahda, the leftwing camp strongly rejects Islamists yet UDC members also suspect that the leftwing Popular Front (*jabha shaabiya*) will rope them in for its own interests and neglect their demands.³⁸ Nonetheless, the UDC is regarded as political by the unorganized unemployed interviewed in the Gafsa mining basin – which is why they reject any cooperation with the only national organization for unemployed people. Even unemployed graduates who join the UDC and could benefit from its lobbying complain that the UDC only pursues its members' interests. However, the UDC's obvious leftwing position makes it look like a "politicized" actor. The refusal to cooperate with "politicized" actors can thus be seen as the result of the interplay of protest and the selective awarding of jobs to "non-political" protesters.

At the same time, however, the UDC is also regarded as being too weak to be able to achieve anything for the unemployed. In fact, the UDC does not have any resources to allocate, or only preferential access to distributing resources. Unemployment benefits in the "Amal (hope)" Program, which was started after Tunisia's revolution, pay just TND 200 (around EUR 80) per month for one year, and only to higher-education graduates – which makes it insignificant. Getting a job remains the only real solution for the unemployed. The UDC's fragmentation at the local and national levels weakens the union. Instead of

37 Interviews and focus groups with UDC activists in Tunis in March 2015 and October 2016.

38 Interviews and focus groups with UDC activists, Tunis, March 2015; see also Antonakis-Nashif (2016: 139).

mobilizing on many levels for its more ambitious goals, local UDC offices operate like unorganized unemployed protesters but are based on pre-existing student activists' networks, while the national UDC only supports local mobilization, which ties up resources and lessens its political clout.

This is a vicious circle: As long as the UDC is excluded from decision-making and negotiating, it can't attract more members who could help it become strong enough to effectively push for change. The national UDC needs to be involved in a dialogue process in order for it to be able to enforce its general demands, or at least get them on the political agenda. Government leaders have little incentive to negotiate with the UDC because it has no significant influence on the unorganized protests: It can't stop or even block them. The UDC's weakness is also due to its lack of confidence in political actors, as well as the strongest civil-society actor and its historic partner, the UGTT. However, the trade union federation also plays an ambivalent role in the growing unemployed protests.

5.2 The UGTT and unemployed peoples' protests: The trade union federation's ambivalent role

The UGTT is regarded as influential and independent – unlike most unions in the Arab world. This is because the UGTT fought for independence from French colonial domination (Beinin 2016:12–15).³⁹ The union also maintained its strong political role as, after 2011, other trade union federations were finally allowed to form (none of which, however, represents any real competition).⁴⁰ When the process of political transformation that started in 2011 seemed to have reached a dead end in 2013, the UGTT was able to use its earlier influence to help, which is why the union received the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize with the three other civil-society organizations of the “National Dialogue Quartet”. Its prominent position predestined the UGTT to help make the voices of the unemployed better heard in the political arena as well.⁴¹ However, a closer look reveals the tensions created by the trade union federation's other roles besides that of being a political mediator. For one thing, by striking, the UGTT itself is a protest actor, which often results in it being blamed for all socioeconomic protests. Actually, although the UGTT does support protests by unemployed people – especially at the local level – the regional and national UGTT leadership are against them. This leads the trade union federation to attempt to mediate between protesters and government agencies but also, sometimes openly reject protests. The

39 The Egyptian Trade Union Federation was founded in 1956 after Gamal Abdel Nasser overthrew the British-supported monarchy, which made it susceptible to state control and cooptation from the beginning (cf. Abdalla/Wolff 2016).

40 For an overview of the new associations, see Bishara (2014: 5).

41 Comparative research on unemployment mobilization shows that despite conflicting interests between trade unionists and the unemployed, union support was the key to the emergence and spread of unemployed movements. For an overview of this debate, see Weipert-Fenner and Wolff (2016).

UGTT can neither drive the explosive protests nor create social peace. This is partly because it has been rather defensive about economic policy since 2011, as a result of the union's heterogeneous membership, which makes it focus on defending workers' interests: Since these partly conflict with the interests of the unemployed, the UGTT cannot also be the main actor to deal with the growing mobilization of unemployed people.

The UGTT is a central trade union that is most active in the public sector and has 24 regional offices, 19 sectors and 21 primary unions (Yousfi 2014: 320). Under the dictatorship, it was easier for the ruling elite to coopt the UGTT through the power concentrated at the head of the union. Despite that, the UGTT's unity gave it enough political clout to be able to negotiate privileges and distribute these to its members. However, the trade union federation overestimated its power twice: In a general strike in 1978 and in the 1984 "bread riots", the UGTT openly resisted the regime, which responded with brutal repression. After that, while the national management refrained from public opposition, local offices maintained their autonomy – so the trade union federation was able to function as a kind of protective cover for all members of the opposition (Yousfi 2015: 56–57). Elections for the executive office remained free and were generally left to the members, which conferred credibility and legitimacy to the trade union federation's leadership (Yousfi 2015: 169).

However, despite having a certain amount of leeway, the UGTT was involved in authoritarian practices. Local UGTT offices were central locations for protests but the regional level was often part of the authoritarian system – and was perceived as such (Beinin 2016: 103; Netterstrøm 2016: 384, 388, 393). The 2008 revolt in the Gafsa phosphate-mining basin is the best illustration of the UGTT's ambivalent role regarding protest: The revolt by unemployed people and their families against the corrupt recruiting practices of the main employer of the region, the CPG, was supported by local union members from the education sector. They were considered very leftwing and rebellious, particularly in comparison with the miners' unions that over the decades had become part of the corruption and patronage networks. The 2008 revolt was in reaction to the way the UGTT regional head Amara Abassi, who was also a member of parliament for the ruling party, manipulated job recruitment. Over the decades, Abassi had used informal networks to create a powerful position for himself in the Gafsa region (Gobe 2010). The way the UGTT steered between cooperating with and resisting the regime was obvious during the mass protests in 2010–2011: For a long time the national leadership sat on the fence. Not until local cadres began to apply tremendous pressure did it grant them the right to organize strikes, while simultaneously calling for restraint. This did not prevent the workers from organizing general strikes in Sfax and Tunis on 12 and 14 January, which finally brought the revolution that had begun in the hinterland to the coastal areas and centers of power (Netterstrøm 2016: 394–395).

After the revolution, in December 2011, the UGTT held its 22nd Congress, principally to elect a new executive board. A minority of its members pledged far-reaching reforms to make it more democratic internally and more decentralized, and to pay more attention to socioeconomic issues, particularly by discussing alternatives to the existing liberal economic model. However, the wing that prevailed placed less emphasis on internal changes than on

consensus and unity, particularly in confronting the governing Islamist Ennahda Party. Hussain Abassi, a member of the UGTT executive office since 2007, was elected general secretary. The former executive board appeared at the congress and excused itself for having supported Ben Ali, which it recognized had been a mistake. However, that was the extent of its analysis of its dictatorial past (Yousfi 2015: 152–184). In addition to the UGTT's vertical lines of conflict, the union also had to seek consensus along other lines: the regions (Sfax against Gafsa), sectors and party membership (Yousfi 2015: 171). The UGTT has become even more diverse with membership increasing from 200,000 in 2011 to over 750,000 in 2014 (Beinin 2016: 126). To paper over the UGTT's heterogeneous membership – which could cause conflict – with its members' shared identity as trade unionists, it became the informal rule to not discuss party and political preferences openly. Members were also urged to keep a distance from all political parties to avoid being used by politicians (Yousfi 2015: 159).

It is difficult to estimate the extent to which the UGTT's practice of neutralizing internal political positions makes it difficult for the union to set a clear political agenda and use its political clout to defend it. The UGTT's power is evident from the way it mediated in the process of political transformation, but the grass roots, whose members see no possibility of asserting their own socioeconomic concerns, are frustrated. In fact, the UGTT's economic policy is unclear. Some members are firm critics of the neo-liberal economic model. At the 2011 congress, demands to cancel economic agreements with the EU and the USA were made – but not adopted. As part of the “National Dialogue Quartet”, the UGTT clearly influenced the constitutional process, but it played no special role in debating the content of the constitution.⁴² In the country's groundbreaking process of *transitional justice*, which regards economic crimes as offenses and views marginalized regions as potential victims, the UGTT did not contribute anything to the issue of social and economic rights (cf. Ottendörfer et al. 2017). Since 2011, the UGTT's main achievement, which its leadership constantly mentions, has been getting salary increases for public-sector workers.

The UGTT focus on workers is also shown by the way it only appeared a few times as a protest actor at the national level, and mostly called for national general strikes in times of political crisis: in December 2012, after Islamists violently attacked UGTT headquarters in Tunis, and in February and July 2013, after leftwing politicians Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi were assassinated.⁴³ Only in November 2016 did the trade union federation threaten a general strike for socioeconomic reasons, after Prime Minister Chahed demanded a two-year pay freeze for public employees to consolidate the budget. At the last

42 For a comparison of the UGTT draft constitution of 2011 and the 2014 constitution, see Karray (2016).

43 <http://www.kapitalis.com/politique/13256-tunisie-l-ugtt-decidee-a-maintenir-la-greve-generale-jeudi-prochain.html>;
<http://www.tunisienumerique.com/tunisie-urgentlugtt-decrete-la-greve-generale-pour-demain/164332>;
<http://directinfo.webmanagercenter.com/2013/07/25/tunisie-assassinat-mohamed-brahmi-lugtt-decrete-une-greve-generale-vendredi/>.

minute, however, the government relented and the strike was called off.⁴⁴ Most strike activities were begun at the local and regional levels by unions in specific sectors: Education, health and transportation were particularly active. A central demand of the strikes was the improvement of specific working conditions and wage increases. Comprehensive reforms to the labor law and raising the national minimum wage were not up for debate.⁴⁵ The UGTT national management defends workers' rights, such as reform of the retirement age, in the political debate.

Because of the strikes, numerous media have presented the UGTT as an obstructionist that risks the nation's welfare for its own clientele. According to them, Tunisia's difficult budgetary situation makes it irresponsible to protest for more salary increases, thereby paralyzing the entire country and further harming the economy (Benoit-Lavelle 2016; Bourial 2016). However, more precise analysis is needed: Public-sector costs have risen to become almost 50 percent of the budget⁴⁶ – because of the many new positions that post-2011 governments have not filled based on needs but rather to calm unemployed protests. The UGTT criticizes this practice; in an interview, the regional UGTT general secretary of Gafsa insisted, "No employment without development".⁴⁷ This clarifies the first division between the UGTT and the unemployed movement: Both are focused on the public sector and are competing for the same part of the constrained state budget.

These basic conflicts are exacerbated by protesters' increasing blockade strategies, whose disruptions particularly affect workers, according to union members. This is clear in Gafsa, where some workers were prevented from entering the mines, and where blockaded streets and railroad lines disturbed phosphate transportation. This interfered with phosphate extraction and processing in the regions of Sfax and Gabes, where a drop in productivity led to cuts in workers' bonuses.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, local UGTT offices support protests by unorganized unemployed people – contrary to regional and national leaders' explicit

44 <http://www.afriqueexpansion.com/fil-de-presse/3593-le-syndicat-tunisien-ugtt-annule-la-greve-generale-prevue-le-8-decembre.html>.

45 See the statements by the Tunisian Minister of Social Affairs in June 2016 at: <http://www.babnet.net/cadredetail-127274.asp>. The same view emerged in the ministry's data for 2012 to 2014, which were available to the authors of the minister's report. For 2015 and 2016, there are only media reports about the figures presented by the Ministry of Social Affairs. The UGTT provided us with an overview of the strikes in the first half of 2014, which we used as a random sample. What stands out are the repeated demands to found unions in the private sector—but only for a specific company or sector, not as a comprehensive demand.

46 <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tunisia/publication/economic-outlook-spring-2016>.

47 Interview with the UGTT's general secretary for the Gafsa region, October 2016; the UGTT's general secretary for the Gabes region and a member of the executive office expressed similar views in November 2014.

48 Interview with the UGTT representative of the Gabes region, November 2014, Gabes; interview with a member of the UGTT's executive board, November 2014, Tunis.

rejection.⁴⁹ However, the extent to which the UGTT's executive office can or wants to control the local units is disputed (Yousfi 2015: 208). Despite local activists' demands for fundamental structural reform to decentralize the UGTT and give the regional and local offices greater formal autonomy, this has not come to pass. In any case, local union members are acting more autonomously and identifying more with local concerns, especially protesters' feelings of hopelessness. However, local UGTT representatives do not drive the protests. They also may not be able to stop them. In light of its failures in mediating, the national UGTT considers that it has minimal influence on local protests.⁵⁰

In summary, the UGTT mostly uses its role of protest actor to defend its members' rights in different sectors and regions. Thus far, the UGTT has been truly successful in consolidating the relatively privileged status of workers and employees in the public sector. The UGTT demanded that the government draft a more comprehensive development and economic policy but did not manage to become a political creative power despite its clout as a mediator in the transformation process. Whether it could or should have assumed this role is disputed by members of Tunisian society and politics who are critical of unions, and by trade unionists themselves. In any case, the UGTT's current strategic orientation has kept the union from being the social actor who can decisively calm the unemployed protests.

6. Findings and possible solutions

In Tunisia, socioeconomic protests have become much more important in recent years. In 2015, they were the most common form of protest, and more socioeconomic protests were held in 2016 than all the protests in 2011, the year of the revolution. At the same time, socioeconomic protests were no longer held at the same time as other protests. The demands became more specific, as expressed in the spate of sectoral workers' strikes, and there were more and more protests by young unorganized and unconnected actors, who primarily demanded state jobs for themselves. Likewise, protest tactics changed from quite peaceful to disruptive, which illustrates the potentially explosive power of the protests of the last two years. Most protests were held in Tunisia's marginalized interior.

This development of socioeconomic protests can be explained by growing dissatisfaction with the still suffering economy. According to the Arab Barometer, well-educated young people, whose rate of unemployment has hovered around 30 percent since the revolution, are particularly unsatisfied with the transformation process. This is shown in the increasing number of protests for employment, which had clearly increased in 2012 and accounted for most of the protests in 2016. The dismal situation of the neglected hinterland also feeds

49 Interviews with the UGTT's regional head in the city of Gafsa and the local union leader in Redeyef in the Gafsa region, November 2016.

50 Interview with a member of the UGTT executive office, November 2014, Tunis.

resentment as the rise in protests in the interior both in absolute numbers and in comparison with the coastal areas indicates.

A second factor that explains the growth in unemployed protests is the Tunisian government's recruitment policy. In attempts to respond to the stagnating high level of unemployment, the governments of the past six years have created more than 200,000 public-service positions – so that the share of people with university degrees working in the public sector has increased compared with their share in the private sector. This shows a certain readiness on the part of the government to improve the situation of well-educated Tunisians. Now, however, more people would like to take advantage of its willingness and are demanding government jobs – by protesting.

The rise in socioeconomic protests also results from dying hopes that a democratic system of government will by itself improve the economy. In 2011, the Arab Barometer put the share of Tunisians who viewed the economy in a democracy as “necessarily weak” at 17 percent, a share of opinion that grew to 49 percent in 2015 (Arab Barometer 2015). Democracy as such is not equated with a thriving economy, and the confidence that mass protests can bring about political as well as general societal and economic change that will allow all members of society to live in dignity has disappeared. Unorganized protests that demand concrete economic measures for specific groups have become commonplace.

Yet why are there concentrated outbursts of socioeconomic protests, when protest groups continue to shrink and act more and more independently?

The qualitative case study of unemployed mobilization examined one of the regions of Tunisia with the most protests, the phosphate-mining region in the Gafsa Governorate. There, too, the protests have become increasingly fragmented, and are now made up of the smallest social networks – families or neighbors. They simply demand jobs at the government mining company, CPG, for the protesters. The analysis showed that the fragmentation comes from many years' interplay of politics and local protests. Since the state mining company was first instructed to reduce the number of workers and welfare services in the 1970s, it has become harder and harder for high school and university graduates to enter the labor market. No suitable alternatives have been created in either the public or the private sector, and the comprehensive package of paid labor and social security that came with a job at the CPG remains in the collective memory. At the same time, the CPG also reminds people of their region's wealth, which local residents would like to share, and how deprived their region is when compared with the country's coastal areas. Since no government either before or since the overthrow of Ben Ali has successfully implemented any plans to develop the region, whenever the disgruntlement grows too loud, the political response is still to create jobs in the CPG (and its subsidiaries) – jobs that are largely viewed as inefficient and unsustainable. This approach buys short-term stability but also stimulates very individualized protests, some of which may run for months and eventually lose their original disruptive character. Nevertheless, they create a form of permanent basic mobilization that, as the protests in 2016 illustrated, need just a small trigger to rapidly develop into a large wave of protests that are hard to control. The political explosive force of these protests became clear in 2008 and 2010-2011.

Who can have a calming effect on these protests and help to steer their demands to the political system where pressure can be applied to develop sustainable solutions?

The two civil society organizations that cooperated with the unemployed in Gafsa before the revolution were able to develop other organizing capacities after 2011. The first potential cooperation partner is the Union of Unemployed Graduates (UDC), which, after the revolution, grew in terms of members and nationwide offices and became more democratic. Its general secretary had a strong media presence and represented what the national UDC criticizes about previous policies, educational system and lack of strategies for creating sustainable jobs – as well as the corrupt and opaque public-service recruitment procedures. The UDC's obvious inability to affect the unorganized unemployment protests has internal and external reasons. Local UDC offices behave quite autonomously, using strategies that strongly resemble those of the unorganized unemployed who use hunger strikes and protracted sit-ins to demand jobs for themselves. Much of the UDC's energy is absorbed trying to get attention for such actions in order to build pressure and help the actions to succeed, as well as protesting government repression of UDC members. These preoccupations make the UDC appear weak and have deterred unorganized unemployed graduates from joining. Added to that is the broad perception that the UDC is a "politicized" actor. Although the UDC clearly belongs to the leftwing of civil society organizations, its members are extremely mistrustful of political parties, including the leftwing *Popular Front*. They have the same fear of being exploited by their real cooperation partner, the UGTT trade union federation because of its ambivalence about the unemployed movement. Here, too, a different dynamic is seen at the local level than at the regional and national levels. On the ground, union members express solidarity with the unemployed, whose hopelessness they share and whose long, disruptive protests are viewed as their only available legitimate resource to exert pressure and eventually be able to leave the state of continuous waiting. The regional and national levels of the UGTT react differently: Besides generally acknowledging the basic problem of high youth unemployment, they criticize the unorganized unemployed protests, especially because blocking streets and railroad lines blocks workers, too. In Gafsa, these protests disrupt phosphate mining and can even bring it to a standstill, disturbing other workers in the production chain. At the same time, the UGTT proposes no clear economic policies to help the unemployed. Its heterogeneity, which increased after the revolution, seems to make this harder, as well as the UGTT's political influence, which resulted from its cooperation with previous governments. Unemployed activists consider that the UGTT represents only the interests of its members, especially those in the public sector for whom it seeks pay raises that would have to be financed from already strapped state coffers – leaving no funds to create new jobs.

How can solutions to this messy situation be found that prevent Tunisia's young democracy from being destabilized through repeated socioeconomic protests?

One important step would be channeling the massive dissatisfaction into inclusive dialogue processes. The 2012 negotiations between the employer organization, the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (*Union tunisienne de l'industrie, du commerce et de l'artisanat*, UTICA), the UGTT and the government, which ended with a

“Social Contract” that was signed on the heavily symbolic 14 January 2013, the second anniversary of the revolution, could serve as a model. The signatories defined the basic principles and goals of the labor market and the social security system that were to be developed in working groups. They further agreed to institutionalize the negotiations in the “National Social Dialogue Council”.⁵¹ Something similar could be considered: a broader framework for publicly discussing central questions about Tunisia’s socioeconomic order that integrates unemployed people. Instead of the usual discussion about how to boost foreign investment, this dialogue would include explicit talk about the state’s engagement in the economy. Should the state assume a stronger role as an employer or should it concentrate on being a regulator? These questions must be frankly discussed because the unemployed mobilization demands government and public sector jobs. Politicians must speak clearly about whether and how they want to develop the public sector, or if they could get the private sector to create more jobs with good working conditions – instead of, or alongside, the government. Private-sector jobs must provide social protection and pay well enough for employees to live on their own and be able to make the transition from adolescence to autonomous adulthood. This approach could pave the way to ending waitthood, which is the key concern of unemployed protests, although it has not been articulated as a demand.

A serious social dialogue requires the participation of organized unemployed actors who can speak and assert themselves so that they do not always have to rely on the UGTT in negotiations and dialogue fora. This has already been proven inexpedient. Right now, only the UDC is available for such dialogue, but as this report shows, it is not regarded as a proper representative of unorganized unemployed people. What would happen if the UDC were integrated into a dialogue forum? Could that motivate more unemployed people to organize within the UDC? Or would this inspire them to found new associations by showing that it is worthwhile to create structures and organizations rather than to continue to protest in the smallest groups until a job materializes? Whether these positive developments actually come to pass requires the political will to cede some power by including people who are mobilized by socioeconomic grievances in decision-making processes – so that they do not just articulate and pursue their interests by protesting.

Dialogue processes could also help the regions a great deal. The protests have clearly shifted to the neglected hinterland where protesters have no government mediator to facilitate communication between local protests and national political figures. Since there have been no municipal or governorate elections since 2011, some administrative bodies are headed by elites from the Ben Ali era or by newly appointed but unelected people who often have no real legitimacy. Political decentralization is the first step toward social dialogue at the regional level, between the regions, and between regions and the national government.

51 The relevant law has been stuck in Parliament since 2014 (Dahmani 2016).

Specific measures to help the regions should be combined with institutional integration in dialogue fora that can pursue long-term sustainable goals and have an immediate calming effect. Regional development funds have already been planned and partly implemented, but unemployed people who applied for funds to found their own companies, complained that the regulations are extremely complicated and the award procedure was susceptible to corruption.⁵² Given the obvious demand, making the process transparent and accessible would be a meaningful step. This report has shown that the region's wealth of resources and low standard of living makes inhabitants indignant. If the regional share of around 25 percent of the profits that is discussed from time to time were actually channeled into sustainable development processes, it could finance basic infrastructure like streets, water and electricity that only the state can provide and combat the impression that people in the hinterland have of being both exploited and neglected. The measures might be short-term but they would create meaningful income-producing activity – unlike the inefficient positions in state companies and public service that post-2011 governments have created.

Finally, the hiring process must be reformed. Opacity opens the floodgates to corruption and clientelism. Even when hiring occurs normally, negative decisions are suspect and rejected. For that reason, recruiting again and again triggers unemployed protests – organized and unorganized, by people with and without university degrees. In order to counteract the (perceived) unfair access to the labor market, hiring procedures must be made as transparent as possible. Since recruiting is believed to be manipulated by local and regional powers in politics, administrative bodies and the union, the practice of integrating actors from other regions or the national level who are viewed as trustworthy and independent should help prevent the abuse of power and nepotism.

Such reforms would demonstrate the political will to crack down on clientelist structures. Thus far, there has been precious little of that. Instead of criminally prosecuting profiteers of the old regime, the Nidaa Tunis–Ennahda coalition proposed a law on “economic and financial reconciliation” (*projet de loi sur la réconciliation économique et financière*) to grant amnesty for public officials and state employees accused of financial corruption and misuse of state funds under Ben Ali, in exchange of a simple fine. This bill was regarded as an attempt to hinder the process of *transitional justice* in Tunisia, which had included economic crimes and corruption in the mandate of the Truth and Dignity Commission (Salehi 2016). Legislators claimed that voluntary declarations and compensation payments were a faster, more discreet way to come to terms with the past. However, that would neither challenge the wealth and ownership structures inherited from the Ben Ali regime, nor solve any crimes nor bring the perpetrators to justice. With union support, the campaign “*Manich msamah*” (“I do not forgive”) mobilized protest against the

52 Interviews with unorganized unemployed activists in Oum Larayes, November 2016. The manager of the local FTDES office in Redeyef confirmed the significant bureaucratic hurdles in November 2016.

proposed reconciliation law and has thus far prevented its passage.⁵³ This bill is seen as the proof that the current government doesn't want to change anything in either old or new corrupt clientelist networks, an impression that must be refuted through clear actions. Reforming the hiring procedure that autocratic elites use to consolidate their control could make an important symbolic contribution – and would practically combat clientelist networks. This in turn could help to calm the growing waves of uncontrollable protest that are accompanied by increasing skepticism about democracy as a form of government. Above all, the impression must be countered that nothing has changed besides free elections and greater political freedoms. Given the security challenges posed by Islamist terrorism, social peace is indispensable for the political stability of Tunisia's young democracy. This is why political actors must dedicate their undivided attention and resources to promoting social justice. The common view that socioeconomic demands must take the back seat because of a faltering economy has to give way to the realization that inclusive decision-making processes, transparency and following the rules for allotting limited resources help create social peace.

53 <http://nawaat.org/portail/2016/07/13/manich-msamah-appelle-a-reprendre-la-rue/>.

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